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Eating at Home and ‘Dining’ Out? Commensalities in the Neolithic and Late Chalcolithic in the Near East

Summary

This paper attempts to draw a picture of different kinds of commensalities in the Near Eastern Pottery Neolithic (7th millennium BC) through an analysis of consumption vessels. The case study will be the Syrian and Turkish regions of the Northern Levant. I shall underline the strong symbolic function of vessels in distinguishing commensal events and argue that the basic role of commensality remains largely unmodified until the end of the Ubaid period (2nd half of the 5th millennium BC). The beginning of the Late Chalcolithic then marks a major change. At this point, the development of different types of commensalities leads to a decrease in the role of pottery as symbolic marker of commensal events.

Keywords: Near Eastern Archaeology; Near East Neolithic; Chalcolithic; commensality; consumption vessels; status.

Dieser Beitrag versucht, anhand der Analyse von Ess- und Trinkgefäßen ein Bild verschiedener Arten von Kommensalität im vorderasiatischen Keramischen Neolithikum (7. Jt. v. Chr.) zu zeichnen. Als Fallbeispiel dienen die syrischen und türkischen Regionen der nördlichen Levante. Ich erörtere die stark symbolische Funktion von Gefäßen zur Abgrenzung von unterschiedlichen kommensalen Anlässen und argumentiere, dass die grundlegende Rolle von Kommensalität bis zum Ende der Ubaid-Zeit (2. Hälfte des 5. Jt. v. Chr.) weitgehend unverändert bleibt. Der Beginn des späten Chalkolithikums markiert dann einen entscheidenden Wendepunkt. Zu diesem Zeitpunkt führt die Entwicklung von unterschiedlichen Arten von Kommensalität dazu, dass die Bedeutung von Keramik als symbolisches Zeichen für kommensale Anlässe an Bedeutung verliert.

Keywords: Vorderasiatische Archäologie; Neolithikum; Chalkolithikum; Kommensalität; Ess- und Trinkgefäße; Kochtöpfe; Status.

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here, and to Maria Bianca D'Anna, with whom I share the interest on these topics and the site we concentrate our study on.

1 Introduction

The seventh millennium BC northern Levant, together with Turkish Cilicia, is identified with the so-called pottery Neolithic Dark-Faced Burnished Ware Horizon – DFBW,¹ or Dark-Faced Ware Horizon – DFW,² a cultural region characterised by the presence of a dark coloured and often burnished, mineral-tempered, handmade ware, with specific recurrent shapes (Fig. 1).

There are three sub-categories of this pottery, all of which have a strong functional specificity. There is a Dark-Faced Unburnished Ware (DFunbW), out of which principally cooking pots were made, a Fine DFBW (FDFBW), highly polished and moulded into goblets and very small bowls, and the more classical DFBW, used mainly for larger bowls (Fig. 2). In addition to this pottery, sites in northern Syria and Lebanon, as in the Amuq and Rouj basins, also share other elements of their ceramic assemblage, which is composed of chaff-tempered storage vessels, chaff-tempered painted wares and other minor categories. In contrast, Turkish Cilicia, exemplified by the site of Yumuktepe, has in addition to the dark-faced categories completely distinct storage jars, with mineral temper and different shapes from those of their Syrian and Lebanese neighbours. These strong similarities in the pottery assemblage are certainly a testimony to the existence of frequent relations between these two regions. Cilicia was situated along the principal road to Central Anatolia, with its important obsidian sources, and this might explain such relations.³ Sites in these two areas are small, essentially with domestic structures and an attested economy principally based on farming and herding, but at times also on hunting. The distinctiveness of part of their ceramic repertoires suggests the autonomy of these two regions;⁴ extremely interesting, however, is their sharing of the same kinds of cooking, eating and drinking utensils (the DFW). Sites in these regions that belong to the 'DFW horizon' have very similar bowls and goblets, and, most importantly, they have no other consumption vessels. The set of food and drink-related pots is thus shared by distinct but neighbouring kin groups, which otherwise have a different ceramic assemblage. I take this as an important indicator of the existence of continuous contacts between these different kin, in which social relations and solidarity were reinforced through shared food consumption. The frequency and importance of these

1 R. Braidwood, L. Braidwood, and Haines 1960.

2 Balossi Restelli 2006, 210.

3 Mellaart 1961, 166; Özdoğan 2002, 255.

4 Balossi Restelli 2006.

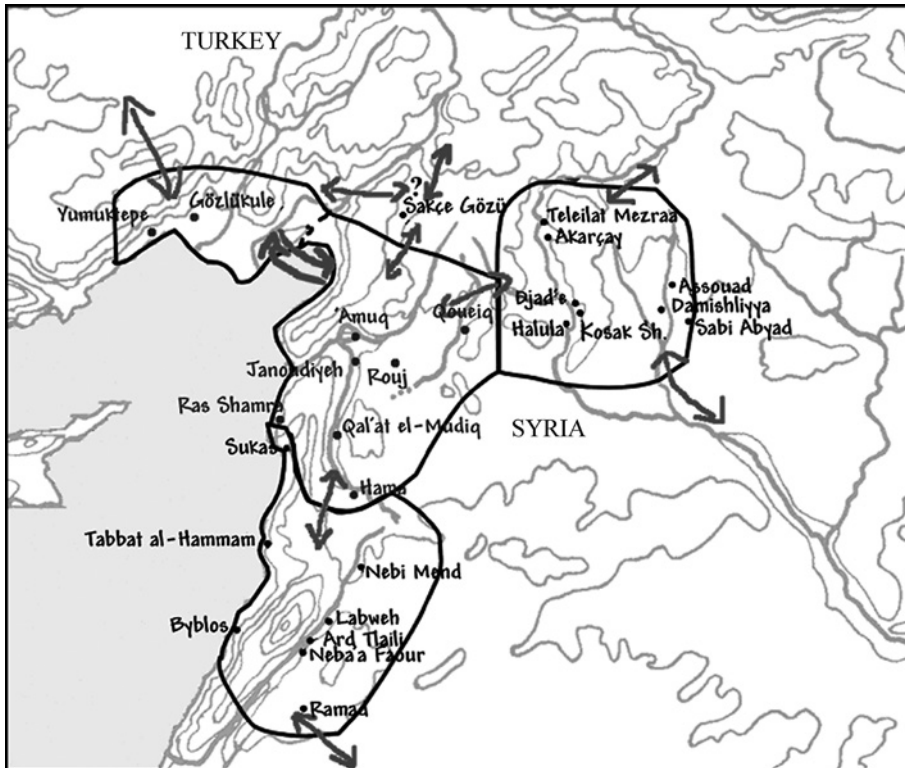


Fig. 1 Regional distribution of pottery assemblages during the Pottery Neolithic (7th millennium BC) in the northern Levant and Middle Euphrates, with indication of the major known sites.

acts possibly stimulated to the production and use of the same bowls. As Tilley⁵ points out for the European Neolithic, symbolic elaboration, which sees a tremendous increase during the Neolithic, is often constructed through the preparation, cooking and sharing of food; the same seems to be the case here.

2 Identifying Commensalities in the Neolithic through Dark-Faced Wares

What kind of commensality can we imagine in these communities? What was used for cooking and how did people eat? The ways in which foods were presented, as well as the foods themselves, certainly varied along several dimensions, including whether the

⁵ Tilley 1996, 66.

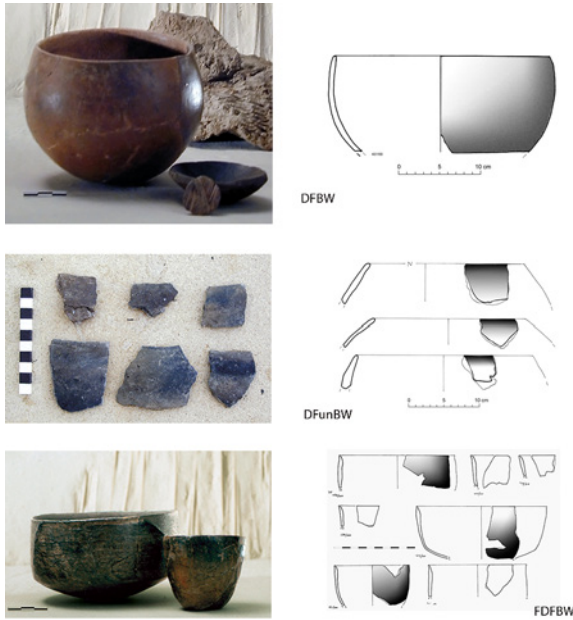


Fig. 2 Examples of the Dark-Faced Burnished Ware, the Dark-Faced Unburnished Ware and the Fine Dark-Faced Burnished Ware from the site of Yumuktepe, dated to the second half of the 7th millennium BC. Drawings and photographs by the author, except photo top left: Isabella Caneva, by permission.

setting in which meals were served was domestic or communal, and whether the group eating together was a nuclear family, a kin group or several kin groups.

Cooking pots were quite simple, hole-mouth jars, dark in colour and mineral-tempered. When we look at the shape details though, we notice that each site appears to have some particularity: vessels from the Amuq region often have small horizontal lugs, whilst in the Rouj basin we see small button-like, pierced applications or horizontal applied bands.⁶ Thus, despite a general similarity of production, there is a certain stylistic personalisation in the cooking pots. This might suggest that cooking was not symbolically relevant during events of communal food consumption; cooking pots might not have been exposed during the intergroup meals.

In this respect, it might be useful to see where the cooking was taking place. In the Rouj 2c period (6300–6000 BC), both Yumuktepe and Ain el Kerkh have evidence of rectangular multi-room domestic buildings, inside which are hearths, probably used for cooking, and tannours (bread ovens; Fig. 3A–B). The specific function of outdoor spaces is not evident and no built cooking areas appear to occupy these spaces.⁷ This would suggest that each family was preparing its own food. At the beginning of the VIth millennium BC (Rouj 2d), there is a shift to a less permanent occupation of the

6 R. Braidwood, L. Braidwood, and Haines 1960, 43; Tsuneki and Miyake 1996, 115.

7 Tsuneki, Hydar, Miyake, Akahane, Arimura, et al. 1999.

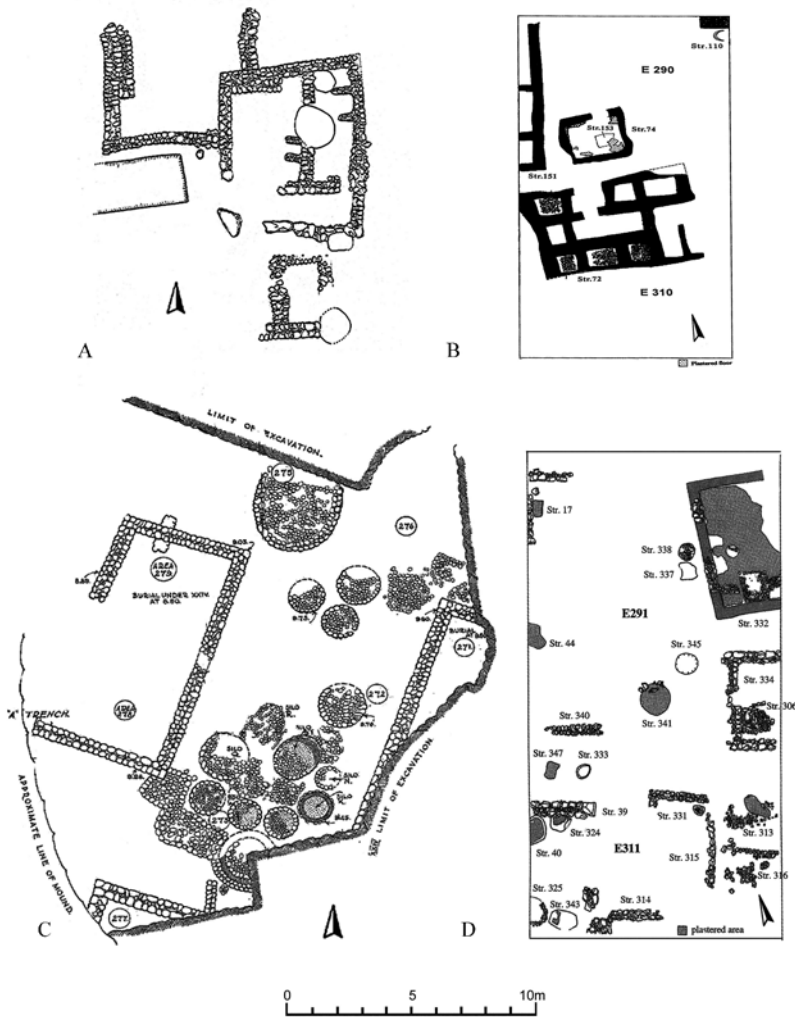


Fig. 3 Occupation at the sites of Yumuktepe and Ain el Kerkh: A. Yumuktepe XXVII, contemporary to Rouj 2c; B. Ain el Kerkh in the Rouj 2c period; C. Yumuktepe XIV, contemporary to Rouj 2d; D. Ain el Kerkh in the Rouj 2d period.

sites, with rectangular animal pens, storage silos, and traces of abundant outdoor activities (Fig. 3C–D). Tannours and hearths are found both outdoors and indoors.⁸ This shift

⁸ Tsuneki, Hydar, Miyake, Akahane, Arimura, et al. 1999, 11.

to more shared activities coincides with an increase in sheep and goat herding, at the expense of the more sedentary cattle and pig.⁹ There would thus appear to be a change in economic and settlement organisation. It is possible that this transformation of the primary economy brought about a more communal organisation of the group's life, where the single family unit became less important than the community in its entirety. A similar situation in the Near East somewhat later is that of the Halaf communities in the 6th millennium BC.¹⁰ A more mobile group, strongly oriented towards herding, probably had a more collective organisation of the economy than that of the earlier sedentary groups. This might explain the presence of external cooking areas, and suggests that in this phase people might have been cooking, even on a daily basis, in highly visible, communal kitchen areas, as well as indoors. Nevertheless the available data do not show an increase in the size of cooking pots, which one might expect if cooking was for larger groups of people; we should imagine either new kinds of commensal events (that were prepared differently) or food preparation that varied according to the people present and participating (for example, there might be periods in which a mobile component of the community was away and others when it was present at the site). Food consumption areas in this period are not at all visible. No communal buildings are known. As for cooking and other activities, it is possible that external areas were used.

This phase also coincides with an important innovation in pottery production, namely the introduction of painted decoration on light-coloured pottery and pattern burnish on the DFBW.¹¹ I believe that the coincidence of these changes is not accidental. More mobile kin groups, with a rather weak political control of their territory, certainly encountered other kin groups with greatly increased frequency. This meant that symbolic meanings conveyed through the objects exposed in these encounters also needed to increase; painted decoration on ceramics, offering a wide stylistic variability, was certainly an excellent way of enhancing symbolic value.¹²

More frequent kin group encounters would increase both the number of intergroup commensal events and their importance in the maintenance of social bonds.¹³ Changes in the ceramic drinking and eating vessels in this phase seem to confirm this supposition. In fact, the fine-paste eating and drinking ware is not present at all in the earlier phase at Yumuktepe; it appears towards the end of the 7th millennium BC and increases with the move to a more mobile life style around 5800 BC.

Concerning these consumption vessels, particularly interesting is the strong relation between their paste categories (temper type and dimension, texture, porosity, firing, colour), morphological types and dimensions. At Yumuktepe there is always a clear, direct relation between at least two of these variables. The two graphs in figure 4 plot

9 Tsuneki, Hydar, Miyake, Akahane, Arimura, et al. 1999, 28.

10 Akkermans and Schwartz 2003, 127–130.

11 Miyake 2001.

12 Balossi Restelli (in press).

13 Appadurai 1981; Jones 2002.

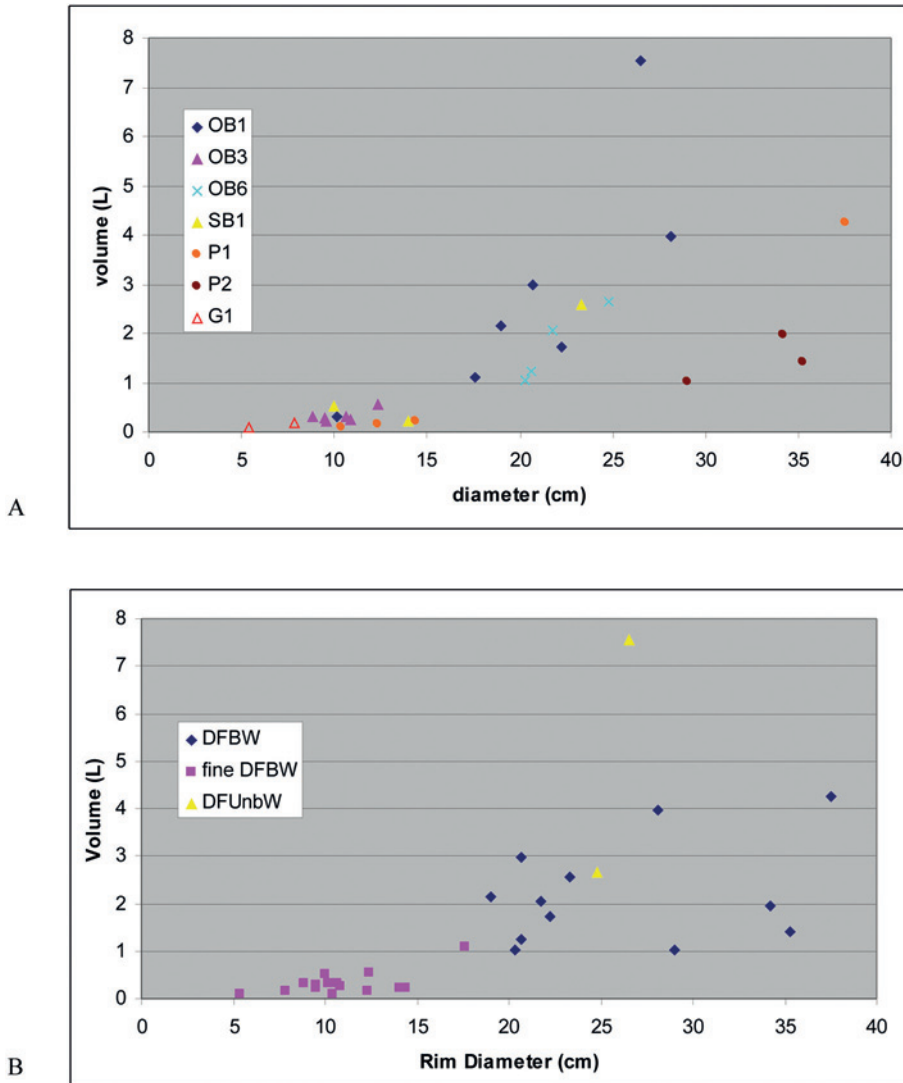


Fig. 4 Consumption vessels from Yumuktepe plotted according to rim diameter (cm) and volume (litres): A. vessels are categorized according to their morphological type; B. the same vessels are categorized according to their paste category.

the same vessels, in one case categorized according to their morphological type (Fig. 4A) and in the other according to their paste category (Fig. 4B). As can be seen, clusters are rather tight. Where this is not the case, as in types oB1 and sB1, this is because the vessels of this shape are made from two different paste categories. The pots of the same

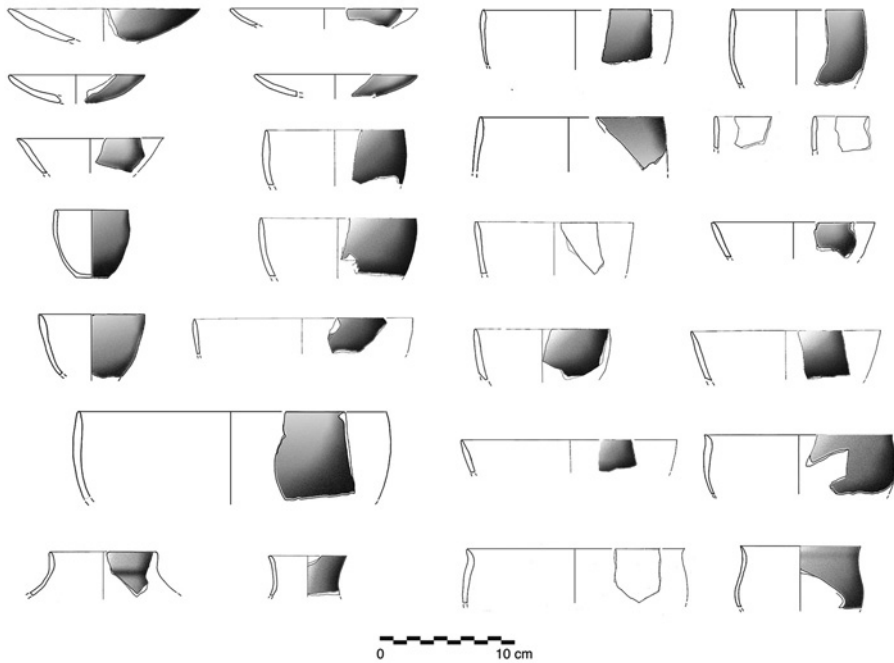


Fig. 5 Examples of Fine Dark-Faced Burnished vessels from Yumuktepe.

category have the same size and plot together. The fine, polished DFBW category is that with the greatest number of exclusive shapes, suggesting that it might have been used in a great variety of occasions (Fig. 5). I suggest that specific shapes may have been charged with specific meanings, as, for example, in terms of the kind of food eaten, the person eating it, or the context of consumption. Furthermore, the exclusivity and elaborateness of most of the shapes in this ware might suggest that they were used in important commensal occasions, whereas simpler plates, such as those made out of the DFBW category, could have more easily accompanied family meals.¹⁴ Goblets are only made out of this ware. As is commonly understood, drinking is a fundamental social act, often more symbolically charged than eating.¹⁵ Whereas we could imagine that in daily food consumption it might not be so important to underline drinking, the presence of these fine polished goblets does suggest particular commensal events. This category of vessels would thus appear to be used in more special or extra-family meals, those with stronger symbolic implications. These vessels are furthermore always of small size,

14 Welch and Scarry 1995.

15 Dietler and Hayden 2001; Pollock 2003.

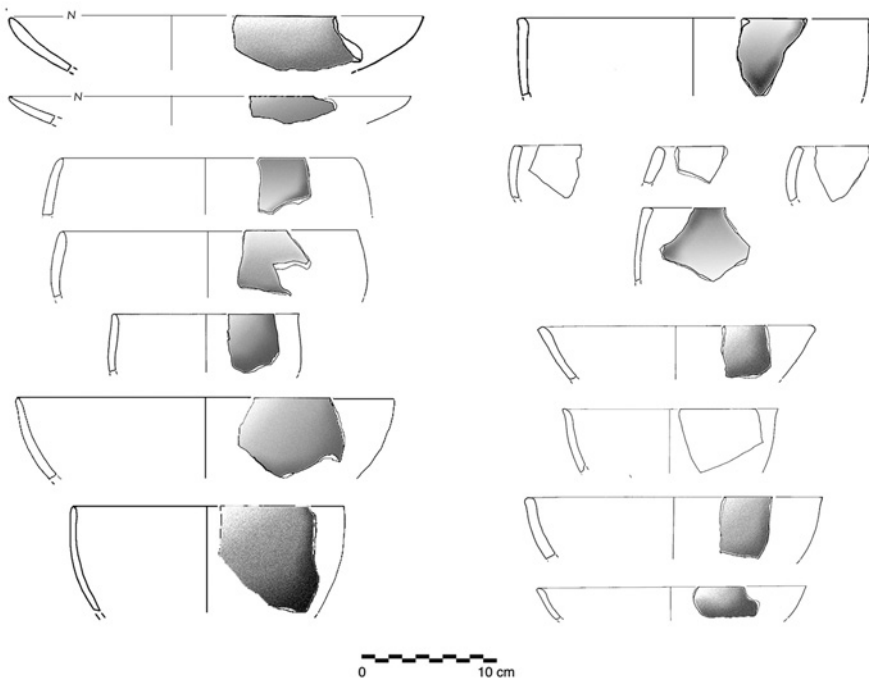


Fig. 6 Examples of Dark-Faced Burnished vessels from Yumuktepe.

suggesting that single, individual servings were used in symbolically more important meals.

The simple DFBW includes bowls of larger capacities and could have been used both for eating and for serving (Fig. 6). I would like to hypothesise that this unpolished ware, simpler in surface treatment and shapes, was the pottery used in common daily meals, whilst the polished ware was used on more important occasions. Data are unfortunately insufficient for the moment to demonstrate this. There is no good context permitting an analysis of the distribution of single shapes. The area investigated is furthermore too small and might be representative of a single type of commensal context, as could be suggested by the extremely high percentage of the small polished bowls and goblets in comparison with the unpolished ones (52% are polished). Daily domestic food consumption and communal dining are at this stage difficult to distinguish archaeologically, even though the pottery analysis seems to suggest that the paste category (Fine DFBW and DFBW) might correspond to these two different contexts.

Better contextual evidence is available concerning secular versus ritual consumption. Very interesting in this respect is the occurrence of three ritual pits at the site of

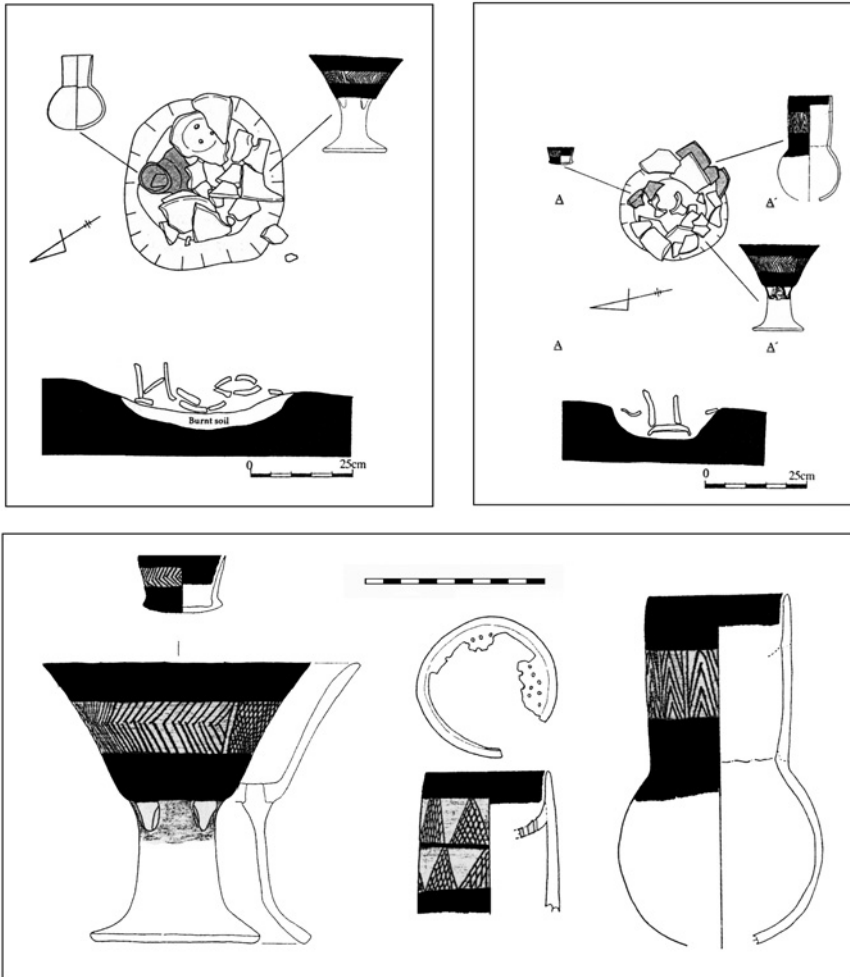


Fig. 7 Two of the ritual pits from Ain el Kerkh. At the bottom left are the drawings of some of the Dark-Faced Burnished pots found in them. At the bottom right is the neck of a vessel from another context, similar to the high-necked jar with sieve in the opening, found in the ritual pit.

Ain el Kerkh in the Rouj basin.¹⁶ These pits were filled with ashes and fragments of purposely broken vessels laid out in an orderly fashion. In two of the pits the set of vessels present was composed by a so-called fruitstand and a long-necked jar, with a strainer at the mouth opening (Fig. 7). In one case a small ‘cream bowl’ was also present. Not of minor importance is the particular pattern burnish decoration on these vessels, which

¹⁶ Tsuneki, Hydar, Miyake, Akahane, Nakamura, et al. 1998.

distinguish them from the rest of the products. I believe that the necked jars were used to serve a drink that had been sieved from another vessel and that originally had undesired floating residues, as could be the case for beer with floating barley grain, or some other fermented beverage. Beer would have been initially put to ferment in large jars, from which it would then have been poured out into these bottles. The strainer at the mouth opening would prevent floating agents from entering the bottle, and the drink would thus be ready to be served, devoid of unpleasant bits. The small neck of these bottles would not allow one to drink directly from them, and I would thus imagine that the fruitstands were used for drinking. Adelheid Otto, in the present volume, illustrates how beer was normally drunk in later Bronze Age contexts in the Near East by using filters and straws. At Tell Bazi she has found only one, or maximally two, beer filters per house, even though drinking cups were numerous. Our Neolithic case shows a different way of consuming fermented drinks, but in both cases there is some degree of sharing of utensils among commensal participants. From the capacity of the bottles (1,7–3,7 l) I would argue that several people must have taken part in the ritual act. It is interesting that there is a single fruitstand in each deposit. I thus imagine that, during the ritual act, whilst something was being burnt inside the pit, the participants all drank out of the same drinking cup, passing it among themselves.

The three most interesting observations to be made from these deposits are first, that only drinking and not eating appears to have taken place in this ritual event (or at least, only drinking has left tangible traces); second, that specific and exclusive vessels seem to have been used – in fact the only contexts in which these shapes with the pattern burnish decoration have been found *in situ* are these ritual pits; and third, even though several people probably participated in this event, it was certainly not the whole community that took part.¹⁷ Again, food preparation, or in this case drink preparation, does not appear to be part of the event.

Meaningful to notice is that at the contemporary but distant site of Sabi Abyad in the Balikh Valley, the dark-faced pots most similar to those of Ain el Kerkh are a fruitstand with pattern-burnish decoration and a high-necked DFBW jar.¹⁸ People from Sabi Abyad probably did not have daily encounters with the inhabitants of the Rouj basin, and eating vessels are in fact distinct from those of the DFW region. Similarities in the material culture and these particular vessels suggest that groups from these two regions did, however, have some kind of relation.¹⁹ The presence of the fruitstand and the high-necked jar suggests that meetings were characterised by ritual drinking between the two different kin groups or their representatives.

17 Pollock 2003.

18 Akkermans 1989; Le Mièrre and Nieuwenhuyse

1996.

19 Le Mièrre and Picon 1998.

A last interesting case concerning ritual events in this region during the Neolithic period is that of burials. Burial rituals generally take the form of a kind of feast, in which some consumption must have taken place;²⁰ in the cases known from Ain el Kerkh, however, we seem to have a rather distinct behaviour. Burials from Ain el Kerkh have one or two very simple undecorated small size necked jars, in which liquids (again, not solid foods) were possibly kept for the afterworld.²¹ Differently to what was noted above, though, these pots are not the particular vessels used in the other ritual occasions, but simple vessels for daily use. Furthermore, their capacities do not suggest that many people had drunk or eaten from them. It would rather appear that if there were a consumption rite at the moment of burial, these were not the vessels used in that occasion. The utensils were probably kept and re-used on other similar occasions. The vessels found with the dead were thus simply part of the dead person's equipment for the afterworld and possibly also to be used by him/her in the particular commensal event of the burial rite, but not by the 'living' participants of the ritual. The simplicity of the pots might furthermore suggest that such a rite was open to wide participation by community members.

The evidence we have from the Neolithic period thus seems to suggest that the strong symbolic meanings with which food and drink consumption was charged were expressed and materialised in the typological complexity and wide distribution of consumption vessels. A shared food consumption event was an important social and political act, and this was clearly expressed in the style of dishes. And differentially elaborated recipes possibly correlated to these stylistic variables of dishes. As Paul Halstead underlines in this volume, food elaboration and recipes most probably change according to the importance of the meal.

I believe that, even though details and specificities into which I do not wish to enter here certainly changed, the later pottery Neolithic and the Early Chalcolithic periods of these regions are characterised by a similar role for commensality. The very wide distribution of the same kinds of pottery corresponds in the Halaf period to a high mobility of groups over very large areas, and the highly decorated and mostly open profile vessels are evidently used for food and drink consumption or serving. In the subsequent Ubaid period, the growth of extended kin family groups certainly led to an increase in inter-family encounters aimed at promoting cooperation and reinforcing social identity, materially expressed through events of commensality.

20 Winter 1999.

21 Tsuneki 2013.

3 Anatolian Late Chalcolithic 1/2: Developing Hierarchies and New Commensalities

With the terminal Ubaid period, something starts to change. During the Ubaid period we have the first evidence of differences in status between families²² and with the end of Ubaid the distribution of the first mass-produced bowls and the administrative material testimonies for the existence of labourers working for different 'house units,' from which they receive, possibly in payment for their duties, food rations.²³ I shall not discuss the system of food redistribution, which is tackled in the present volume by Jason Kennedy for the Ubaid and by Maria Bianca D'Anna for the later Late Chalcolithic 5 (LC 5), but it is important to signal that from this moment on, we start having two distinct forms of commensality, one between 'equals' and another underlining social diversity.

Let me start with the first, the one that still follows the earlier tradition, commensality between 'equals,' represented by interfamily, intergroup or inter-kin dining events.

The LC 2 occupation at Arslantepe (4200–4000 BC), in the Anatolian Upper Euphrates region of modern Turkey (Fig. 8), is characterised by a domestic quarter with at least three distinct units.²⁴ Interesting here is the distribution of *in situ* vessels. It appears from the distribution of cooking pots, that food preparation took place only indoors (Fig. 8) and that each domestic unit had its own kitchen; it furthermore seems that food was prepared both for small-scale and large-scale dining, since cooking pot capacities in a single kitchen range between 3 and 13 litres. Extremely rare are *in situ* intact bowls. Rim sherds from a 10cm-thick deposit above the floor, however, indicate a particularly high presence of bowls in room A700 and in the courtyard. It is thus possible that the dining halls were outdoors or in the empty room to the south.

In the Neolithic variability in shape and size of bowls is very high: rim diameters range from less than 5 to more than 54cm and volumes from 100 ml to more than 7 l (Fig. 9a–c). This strong variability is found in the Arslantepe LC2 bowls, too, and, as in the Neolithic, LC2 evidences a strong correlation between morphology, size, and, in some cases, paste categories. Paste category correlates with shape, for example, in some very specific, very nicely burnished bowls (Fig. 9a–b) with a complex kind of multiple groove on the exterior of the rim (the so-called *graupolierte Keramik* of Oylum Höyük).²⁵ Is it thus possible that in these cases paste categories retained a specific meaning, which could underline, for example, as hypothesised for the Neolithic, the type of dining event (daily, communal, intergroup, ritual)?

If we plot the dimensions of bowls according to morphological type we see very clearly that each type is moulded in at least three different size groups (Fig. 10). Could the shape be associated with the kind of food or the context of commensalism and the

22 Roaf 1989; Bernbeck 1995; Frangipane 1997.

23 Pollock 2003.

24 Balossi Restelli 2008.

25 Özgen et al. 1999.

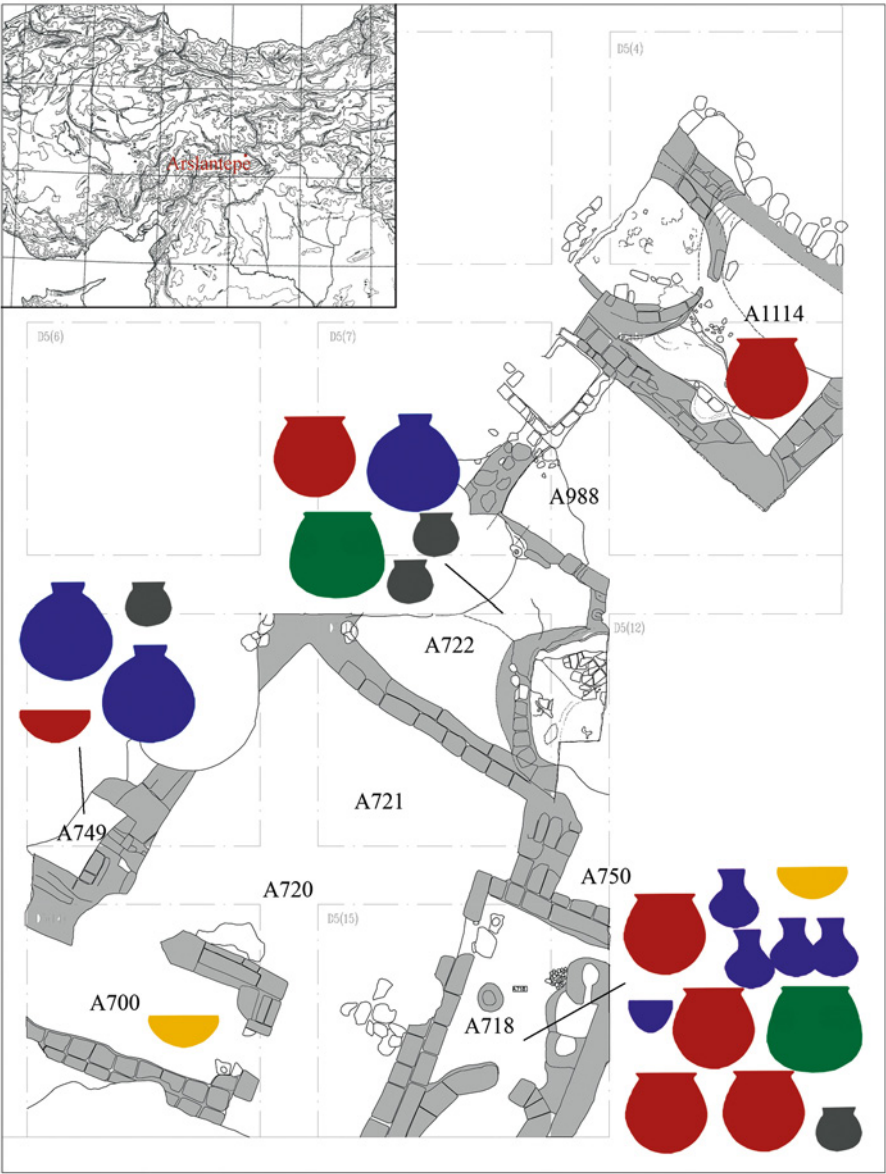


Fig. 8 Domestic quarter at Arslantepe period VIII, with indication of the *in situ* whole vessels found.

dimension indicate the person eating out of the bowl (child, adult male, adult female)? I would exclude the idea that differing pastes are solely representative of production units, as distribution of these different pastes and shapes in the dwellings is apparently



Fig. 9 Bowls from Arslantepe, a–c: period VIII (4200–4000 BC); d–e: period VII (3900–3400 BC). Photographs of the MAIAO (Missione Archeologica Italiana in Anatolia Orientale), by permission.

random. Since we imagine a domestic, or at least not specialized pottery production for this period, this distribution would rather appear to be due to use. Whatever the specific meaning, I take this to suggest that consumption vessels were still charged with symbolic meanings linked to the dining context and its participants.

At the same time, though, in the Arslantepe domestic dwellings we have mass-produced bowls.²⁶ These have a coarse paste, with very basic and unspecific profiles and rims and no decoration, and thus lack visual markers that suggest specific symbolic contexts of use, and probably convey no other meaning than the simple fact that food is being handed out (Fig. 9d–e). The only regular variability of these bowls is their dimension, clearly visible in the later period VII mass-produced bowls of Arslantepe. Measurements by Paolo Guarino have demonstrated two main clusters at 500ml and 900ml, interpreted as indicating different workers, as male and female, or unskilled and specialised workers.²⁷ In the use of this kind of vessel, there is, in my opinion, no intention of conveying other information related to what is being eaten and how. The commensal event is not one in which solidarity is enhanced. Even though it ideologically unites its participants,²⁸ and certainly in this sense the fact that bowls are all alike contributes to this, the gesture of handing out food becomes a strong symbolic act of superiority, where the

²⁶ Frangipane 1993; Trufelli 1994.

²⁷ Balossi Restelli and Guarino 2010.

²⁸ Gero 1992.

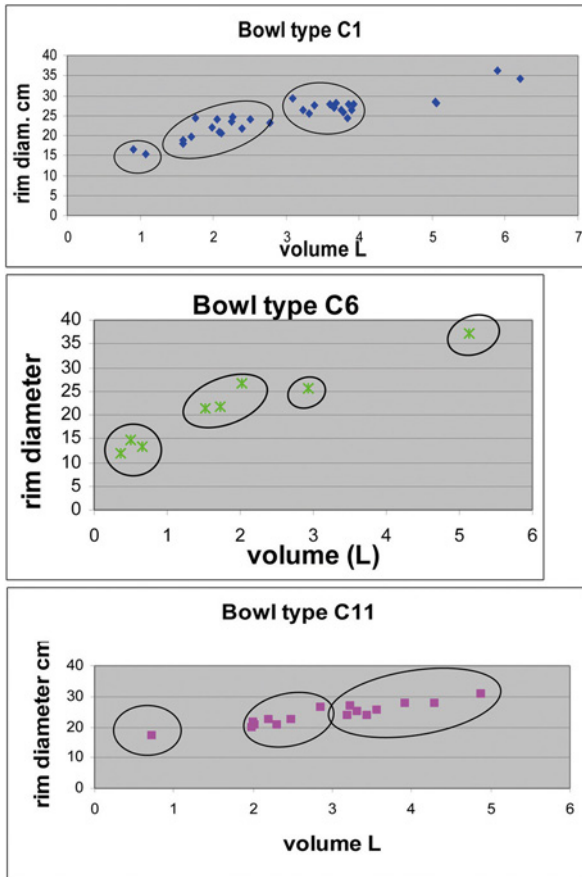


Fig. 10 Arslantepe period VIII bowls of three different morphological types (types C1, C6, C11) plotted against their rim diameter and volume. Each type is composed of 3/4 dimensional clusters.

person who is receiving food does not really feel compensated, but remains instead in a position of inferiority.²⁹

In Arslantepe VIII these mass-produced bowls represent 11% of the total bowls from these levels. A significant part of the food was thus starting to be consumed using these bowls. Interesting is the fact that these are all non-elite domestic contexts. Had the bowls been used in these houses or in some other public space and then brought home? Were they re-used once at home?

²⁹ Hayden 1996; Wiessner 1996.

4 Late Chalcolithic 3–5: The Loss of Symbolic Value of Consumption Vessels

The following period VII (3900–3400 BC) might help in discussing the problem mentioned above: the variability of vessels for food consumption appears to be strongly reduced in comparison to period VIII. Paste and shape variability is minimal. Wheel-made pottery appears, even though it does not completely take over the entirety of pottery production. Hand-made bowls with mixed temper do show more variability than their wheel-made counterparts, whilst the latter show a certain standardisation in shape and size. The majority of bowls consists of coarse, conical, flint-scraped, mass-produced ones. Another category of vessels, with a finer mixed temper, a red or orange slip and burnished, is mostly that of goblets.³⁰ Overall in period VII bowls are mostly mass produced, and goblets are primarily red slipped. I see this reduction in variability as an indication that, at least on certain occasions, consumption vessels were no longer used as a symbolic marker for the type of meal taking place; the symbolic value conveyed by the consumption vessels seems to me to have changed.

This is probably not surprising in the case of bowls used by the elites for the distribution of meals or rations, as is in fact the case in a large ceremonial building at Arslantepe VII that has an estimated number of more than 1100 *in situ* mass-produced bowls (Fig. 9d–e), of which 262 are fully intact.³¹ As stated above, in this case the convivial event is intended as a way of strengthening political and social power.³²

An elite residence and a series of long rooms with a possible storage function, dated to Arslantepe VII, have a majority of mass-produced bowls, even though the presence of the red-burnished goblets and bowls is higher than in other contexts. The very high percentages of mass-produced bowls and most of all the absence of any real alternative to these consumption vessels, indicate that these bowls were probably not only used in the distribution of meals to labourers, but they had started being of common, daily use in elite buildings, too. This might thus explain why, in period VIII, we start having mass-produced bowls in the houses as well (Fig. 9c).

Period VII non-elite domestic buildings, on the northeastern edge of the mound exhibit some variability in bowl types that recall period VIII. This suggests that at home pottery still partially distinguished different kinds of commensalities, but the increasing quantities of conical bowls accompany the disappearance of this tradition; the use of a specific plate for a particular purpose was no longer so important.

In comparison to the Neolithic, territorial boundaries of these communities were rather well defined, relations between groups were regulated by politics and economy, whilst in the Neolithic groups crossed into each other's territories continuously and

30 Frangipane 1993.

32 Dietler 1996.

31 D'Anna and Guarino 2011.



Fig. 11 Examples of consumption vessels from Arslantepe VIA. On the left are those of local tradition, whilst on the right are the Transcaucasian ones. Photographs of the MAIAO (Missione Archeologica Italiana in Anatolia Orientale), by permission.

thus had to constantly mediate and regulate relationships and resettle identities. Needs for these kinds of negotiations were probably less strong in the Late Chalcolithic phase. They had not disappeared, though, as the hand-made and red-slipped goblets and bowls testify; they were possibly used when families met to settle relations and discuss social or economic matters. The rarer fruitstands, possibly used in special, perhaps ritual events, may point to a similar phenomenon.

Thus, the mass-produced bowls that had possibly first entered the houses with rations came to be used as common consumption dishes. Furthermore, the identity of all consumption bowls possibly contributed to the construction of social identity in this period of growing elite power. The higher presence of red-slipped goblets in domestic contexts is probably not casual, because it is in these places that encounters between ‘equals’ – occasions on which social relations had to be concretely mediated – could still have taken place. It was on these occasions that the more particular vessels – again mostly drinking vessels – were used.³³ This greater importance of drinking in the encounters in which social solidarity was possibly sought further stresses, in my view, the distinction between this kind of commensality and that of period VII temple ceremonies, where the shape of the bowls would hint at the distribution of solid food instead.

Arslantepe period VIA (3300–3000 BC) commensality would appear somewhat similar to what was first seen in period VII. Consumption vessels – if we exclude again the special ‘fruitstands’ found in ceremonial contexts – are in fact, essentially the mass-produced conical bowls, suggesting that there was no need to differentiate dishes for

³³ Hastorf and Johannessen 1993.

distinct consumption events; along with these, however, red-black cups and jugs of foreign origin appear (Fig. 11). Once again, where social relations have to be reinforced, as was the case of those between the inhabitants of Arslantepe and the newly arrived groups bringing a red-black pottery tradition, it is consumption vessels, and in particular drinking devices, that are shared and become symbolically important.³⁴ Within one's own territory, thus in intra-site relations, did the moment of food consumption lose its social cohesive power, becoming on the one hand an instrument of socio-political and economic control by elites over others³⁵ and on the other a simple act of eating? Whilst I believe that the first is true, I do not think so for the second statement. Food consumption was still an important social event, but pottery no longer visibly expressed the complex symbolism of dining. Instead of differentiating between the kinds of meals, food and participants, pottery rather suggested an overall identity of all consumers. Pottery was at that point very standardised as a consequence of the specialised production managed by central institutions, which were those promoting the first kind of commensality, the one expressing social distinction more than social solidarity. The centralised organisation of craft production might also be partly to blame for the loss of the symbolic role of consumption vessels as markers of distinct types of commensalities.³⁶ As regards commensality, furthermore, other symbolically relevant elements, which for the moment are invisible to us, must have remained, and these distinguished between different kinds of dining events; these could have been, for example, the kinds of food consumed or the places in which meals were eaten.

5 Conclusions

In conclusion, I hope to have demonstrated how the typological complexity of consumption vessels in the Neolithic period may reflect the centrality and variability of commensality in the daily life of communities. 'Dining,' intended as commensal and symbolically meaningful food consumption, and eating are inseparable concepts. The attributes of eating vessels were in my opinion symbolically representing the different foodways characterising this period. Drinking, within convivial events, would seem to have been reserved for the most particular and ritualised moments. Food preparation appears instead not to have been as symbolically charged.

This changes significantly in the Late Chalcolithic period. With the growth of a central political elite who exerted substantial economic control, we witness the separation of two kinds of commensalism: one promoting solidarity and the other instead forming the locus of strategic social and political legitimisation. The contexts of these different

34 Palumbi 2008, 312–314.

36 Pauketat and Emerson 1991.

35 Potter 2000.

commensalities are separate and, initially, the vessels used were also distinct, but pottery gradually loses its role of symbolic material expression of varying commensalities, and all dining events come to use the same dishes. When inter-group or inter-regional convivial encounters are involved, however, particular culturally and symbolically charged pottery is again used.

The data analysed has indicated a certain separation between cooking and eating activities, both in domestic and in public/ritual contexts. Maria Bianca D'Anna, in the present volume, suggests that cooking became an active part of the ceremonial commensalities of Late Chalcolithic 3–5 periods in which there was widespread participation. I believe this change is explainable by the new role of this type of commensality. These commensal events intentionally underline the gesture of giving, of handing out food from one part of the community to another: large cooking pots full of food would surely have been more impressive to look at than many single, small serving bowls, thus perfectly fulfilling the function of underlining the great generosity of elites in the distribution of goods to the rest of the community. After all, the Late Bronze Age ritual texts from Emar, which Walter Sallaberger discusses in the present volume, indicate very clearly how it was much more important to 'show off' how much food was offered to the gods than to actually feed them.

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